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SUBJECT: IIP COORDINATOR ALEXANDER FELDMAN'S VISIT TO
SINGAPORE

¶11. (SBU) Summary: Senior Minister Goh Chock Tong expressed his concern about a rising tide of Islamic conservatism to Coordinator for International Information Programs (IIP) Alexander Feldman during his February 16 - 19 visit to Singapore. SM Goh urged the United States to encourage Muslims to "be part of the modern world." In separate meetings, Minister in Charge of Muslim Affairs Dr. Yaacob Ibrahim and leaders of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) briefed Feldman on GOS efforts to promote moderate Islam through youth programs and the latest communication technologies. End Summary.

¶12. (U) During his February 16 - 19 visit to Singapore, Coordinator for International Information Programs (IIP) Alexander Feldman met with Senior Minister Goh Chock Tong, Minister in Charge of Muslim Affairs Dr. Yaacob Ibrahim, and officials from the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS). He also discussed jihadists' use of technology with analysts at the Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), a government-linked think tank.

Rising Islamic Conservatism

¶13. (SBU) Senior Minister Goh, who spearheads Singapore's engagement with the Middle East, warned about a rising tide of Islamic conservatism that wanted "to take the world back to the seventh century." Goh noted the increasing influence of Wahabiism and Arab values and cultural habits on Southeast Asia's Muslims, citing the growing numbers of women wearing head scarves and refusing to shake hands with men. Goh reiterated the GOS concern about Malaysia's increasing Islamization, commenting that Malaysia's political parties were competing over "who is a better Muslim" and "which brand of Islam is better for Malaysia."

"Corrupting the Conservatives"

¶14. (SBU) Cautioning that "it is important that Muslims remain as moderate as can be," Goh urged the USG to reach out and show that "we're not against Islam." Goh emphasized that the United States could not convert Muslims to American values, but should encourage them to "be part of the modern world." Those Muslims willing to consider American values were already listening, and "the other side, they will never tune in," Goh asserted. The USG must reach out, for example, through radio broadcasts. In his meetings with Muslim leaders, Goh stresses that "we are all on the same side" and "must stand up together against extremism."

"Lifting the Veil"

¶ 5. (SBU) Goh argued that education (especially of women) and economic development were the keys to stopping Islamic fundamentalism. As part of this effort, Singapore initiated the Asia-Middle East Dialogue (AMED), and was establishing a training institute in Jordan. Goh mentioned that he "subversively" and "subtly" promoted women's education during his visits to the Middle East.

Singapore's Approach

¶ 6. (SBU) The GOS wanted Singapore's Muslims to "have the best of both worlds," retaining their religious identity but participating fully in modern society, Minister Yaacob explained during his meeting with Mr. Feldman. The GOS, through MUIS, emphasized the importance of education, to help Malay/Muslims compete with the ethnic Chinese, Goh said. MUIS has harnessed technology to promote progressive Islam, Yaacob noted. On Fridays, MUIS sends out an SMS highlight of the official sermon, for example. MUIS has also teamed up with Islam Online to provide content and ensure that emailed requests for religious guidance from Singaporean Muslims were answered by Singaporean scholars.

¶ 7. (U) Mr. Feldman did not have the chance to clear this message before his departure.

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